Region III Public Meeting 2 —
Media Issues
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
March 4, 1999

Background

In October 1998, the EPA Region III Public Sector Needs Identification Team launched an assessment of customer needs and preferences for environmental information. This assessment involved a series of five facilitated public meetings conducted in cooperation with the EPA Region III office. Each meeting investigated a different stakeholder group, its current information gathering methods, its information needs, special issues for the stakeholder group, and investigation of the Customer Information Process (CIP) and Information Attribute (IA) priorities for the group.

The CIP and IA analysis tools were developed in 1997 for an EPA customer study conducted by the Center for Environmental Information and Statistics (CEIS) and the Environmental Monitoring for Public Access and Community Tracking (EMPACT) Program. This study sought to characterize customer needs for environmental and health-related information, preferences for accessing information, and interest in having more time-relevant monitoring and reporting capabilities. The CIP/IA framework is described in more detail below.

Summary Statement

The public meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was attended by media representatives from print media, television, and radio stations, and included one representative from the Air and Waste Management Association Publications Department. For this group, information was a requirement to support production of news stories and development of newspaper articles. Access to individuals qualified to speak or provide information on various environmental topics was a critical requirement of their work. The group stated that EPA needed to facilitate the flow of information through development of a media and information resource guide. The group concurred that EPA must deliver information in a timely fashion, to the appropriate media contacts, and in a form that was understandable to the lay person.

Wish List

The group was asked to suggest ways in which EPA could better serve their information needs. The group suggested:

- Development of a regularly updated Media Guide with contact names, phone numbers, and addresses;
- Timely release of regular press advisories forwarded to the right people within a media organization;

- Jargon-free information releases using measures, comparisons, and concepts that the lay person can understand;
- Regular briefings or conference calls to notify the press concerning ongoing issues, problems, and upcoming events;
- Establishment of an EPA field office in Pittsburgh with a local contact for better accessibility;
- Stories that show positive results and help the public understand how EPA actions have relevance in their lives.

Information Experience

Members of the group made it clear that their information needs revolved around the development of stories, and that contacts were needed to facilitate the identification of quotable expert sources. As one participant stated, " . . . we are looking for the talking head or a sound bite that can address the local issue." In addition, participants explained that information used to develop stories needed to be timely, or quickly obtainable and understandable. On the issue of understandability, one participant stated, " . . . there is a problem where a reporter has to become a decoder, it is easier when the EPA and the reporter are on the same level . . . " The group said that understandability was enhanced by the inclusion of illustrations and measures of environmental impact that the lay person could understand. One T.V. producer said, "we need pictures," to help with a story.

When asked how they decided who to contact when a story broke, it was clear that in some cases they had an idea of where to go, while in other cases, where there was no concrete contact, they called every agency that could have been involved. One participant stated, in reference to the latter case, "We fire a shotgun and we call them all. . . . Then we wait to see, given our deadline, who's going to give us what we need within the parameters of how quickly we need it."

It was clear that the entire group felt contacts were vital to the work they did. As one participant put it, "we are not just looking for the information . . . we want [people] who we can put on TV, other contacts, referrals . . . " Often, the story was examined from several viewpoints, so experts from various sides of an argument were needed.

The group agreed that the public's understanding of environmental issues has grown. One participant stated, "I think there is a growing awareness of environmental issues in general. The public is coming to the realization that this is important." One participant said, "That grass roots level is much more educated than ever before . . . now you've got doctors and university professors at the forefront of some of these groups and movements."

Problems with EPA Information

There was broad agreement that the Agency needed to address its inability to explain things in a manner was readily understood by the media. As one participant stated, "If you are pitching a story, we need to know up front what is the impact, why is this important to our audience, why we should care, and if it is written in agency-ese . . . it goes in the stack to be looked at later."

Another added, ". . . if we don't get [understand] it, the term broadcasting means we are casting that out to the broad masses, who don't stand a chance, then, of grasping the point you are trying to convey . . . " Group members strongly agreed on the need for EPA to prepare and present information in a manner that is broadcast worthy, both in language choice and presentation (including visuals), and easily passed along to the public. As one participant said, "we need pictures" and, "it will get extra bonus points if it is visual."

When asked how they would like to receive information from EPA, there was general agreement that faxes were better than E-mail from the standpoint of speed, but that it was important that a fax be sent to the right person. One participant said, "We are not E-mail savvy. . . . at the stations we rely on good old AP and the fax machine, and also PR news wire." Another said that information needed to come "by fax, with someone's name on it in the news room." In addition, the group members agreed that it would be great to have "a heads-up phone call letting you know a significant fax is coming--a big story."

Participants were surprised by the number of databases and hotlines that the Agency maintained. One member responded, "that is another reason for a media guide. We didn't know there were so many of these databases and Web pages." When asked the degree to which they used EPA Web sites, databases, and hotlines, answers ranged from "not at all" to "marginally" to "major use."

Another attendee raised the point that sometimes they felt sure that EPA had the information they needed in the databases, but they didn't know what search strategy to employ to get the information in a timely fashion. That participant felt that "the search engine on their Web site could be more defined." After attempting a fruitless Web search, one reporter said she wound up using five year-old ozone non-attainment data in a story because should could not find current data in time to meet her deadline.

Because contacts are such an integral part of the news business, the group called for EPA to develop a media guide that would include additional EPA resource information. When asked what the guide should include, individuals responded with statements such as, "where to go, what databases there are, what the Web site is and who to call about it" and " . . . a media guide of who the contacts, sources, and various issues are." One participant added, "and hopefully those would be sources that have past clearance, that are quotable, that we don't have to set up an interview . . . which gives us a little more flexibility in meeting our deadlines." Another said, "[With] DEP . . . we have come to almost expect...the immediate response . . . and clearly that offers an advantage for them over the EPA."

Special Areas
The information needs of this group were centered on requirements to effectively develop and present environmental stories. Emphasis was placed upon obtaining information from EPA in a timely fashion. The group believed that EPA needed to do a better job of communicating the significance of a given issue by communicating with the media using jargon-free terms and

comprehensible measures. Participants agreed that stories needed to be supported by graphics and quotable expert sources to support media work.

As a whole, this group relied heavily on personal networking and contacts to do their jobs. The group agreed that EPA could help greatly by producing a media guide that listed the names and phone numbers of people within the Agency that could support them directly with information requests, and by helping them identify quotable local experts. The group also felt that access to EPA personnel should be enhanced by having contacts available during weekend and evening hours, because "news happens all the time."

Media Guide
The media group repeatedly remarked on the utility of a formal media guide from EPA. This guide should incorporate :

- Information resources available at EPA;
- Mission statements;
- Organization and cross reference by office, region, and area of concern;
- Clarification on local, state, regional and Federal jurisdiction; and
- Information on specific data sources such as databases, hotlines, and Web pages.

The group thought that a media guide would streamline the process of getting information, whether for an everyday environmental story or for reporting on an emergency.

Customer Information Process/Information Attributes

EPA adopted a framework to compile and categorize meeting commentary. This framework included an assessment of the Customer Information Process (CIP) and the Information Attributes (IA) important to EPA stakeholders. The CIP has four basic elements: Identification (establishing the existence and location of information), Acquisition (obtaining the information in an appropriate format), Management (adapting, translating, integrating, or combining the information to the customer's unique purpose), and Use (applying, interpreting, or assimilating the information in a value-added manner). Second, the meetings have been assessed according to Information Attributes. Topical attributes for the IA analysis included: Media (e.g., air, water); Industry (sector), Geography (e.g., site specific, local, regional); Legislation/Regulation; Time Dimension (e.g., update schedule); Demographics; Accuracy/Reliability; and Other Topics such as health concerns.

This section highlights the CIP and IA priorities for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania media interests meeting.

In terms of the Customer Information Process, the group focussed on issues related to identification and acquisition. The group repeatedly mentioned its inability to identify and contact an appropriate person at EPA in a timely manner. Members found EPA's structure difficult when searching for a contact. Participants commented, "there are too many layers" and "the point person needs to know who to send you to." Another added, "the problem is the media sources are capable, but if they have to refer to other sources, it creates a layer, it would be better if [we] could go directly to people who knew, that we're told....are free to talk about their area of expertise." The media guide was proposed as part of a solution to this issue.

The group discussed information attributes pertaining to media, geography, regulation, time dimension, and reliability. Emphasis was not placed on any particular media, although clearly a broad spectrum was being considered (air, water, toxics, and hazardous waste cleanup). From the standpoint of geography, these news organizations were largely focussed on information with a local or regional context.   Regulation was discussed, particularly with regard to its effect on employment, economy, and the environment.

The importance of information timeliness was a major topic of discussion, and it was clear that EPA must work harder to get information to the media in a much more timely fashion than it currently does. EPA could also affect timeliness by working to allow the media to interact with the Agency in a more expedient, directly accessible, and "user friendly" manner than it currently does. The group expressed a desire to be able to access EPA during evening and weekend hours.

The media often took expert opinion at face value, and one participant commented reliability was not a concern, "I never thought about it until you brought it up. I may question the reason for it . . . the standard. I go to other experts to question their standards, or whether it is necessary to dig up a leaking tank, but I don't question what they [EPA] tell me...I deem their information very reliable." The group noted that the media makes an effort to tell all sides of a given story, and highlights conflicting information as it comes up. But, ultimately, the public had to decide whose information is reliable.

EPA/Region III
The group as a whole had significant interaction with EPA Region III personnel. Members agreed that Region III could best help them by providing a regularly updated media guide with the contacts necessary to develop news pieces given their time restrictions; and providing some means of contact after hours and weekends. The group also concurred that EPA press releases would be much more useful if they were released before noon each day. One member further suggested EPA give regular press conferences or host regular conference calls to keep the media current on environmental issues and stories.

Participants

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